



The Influence of Peer Group Relationships on Cyberbullying, With Empathy as A Mediating Variable in Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying behavior is one of the psychosocial issues that continues to increase along with the intensity of digital media use among Generation Z. This study aims to analyze the influence of peer group relationships on cyberbullying, with empathy as a mediating variable in Generation Z. This research employs a quantitative approach with a correlational design. The study involved 382 Generation Z respondents selected using a quantitative sampling technique. Data were collected using peer group relationship, empathy, and cyberbullying scales that have met validity and reliability requirements. Data analysis was conducted using path analysis. The results show that peer group relationships have a significant effect on both cyberbullying and empathy, and that empathy also has a significant effect on cyberbullying. In addition, empathy is proven to act as a mediating variable in the relationship between peer group relationships and cyberbullying. These findings indicate that the quality of peer relationships and empathetic abilities play an important role in reducing cyberbullying behavior among Generation Z. This study recommends strengthening positive peer relationships and developing empathy as part of strategies to prevent cyberbullying among adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has transformed patterns of social interaction among adolescents, particularly within Generation Z, who have grown up in environments closely connected to social media. The high intensity of digital media use brings various psychosocial implications, one of which is the increasing phenomenon of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a form of aggression carried out through digital media and has significant impacts on adolescents' psychological well-being, such as stress, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem (Sudarta, 2022). This form of cyberbullying is very common כיום, with both victims and perpetrators being widespread.

Various studies indicate that cyberbullying behavior among adolescents is influenced by social and psychological factors. One important social factor is peer group relationships (Zhan et al., 2022). Peer relationships during adolescence serve as a primary context for socialization that influences the formation of individual attitudes, values, and behaviors. Positive peer relationships can encourage prosocial behavior, whereas negative relationships have the potential to increase aggressive behavior, including in online contexts (A et al., 2023).

In addition to social factors, empathy is also a relevant psychological factor in explaining cyberbullying behavior. Empathy refers to an individual's ability to understand and share the feelings of others, both cognitively and affectively (Rizky Fitriasyah & Waliyanti, 2020). Individuals with low levels of empathy tend to be less considerate of the emotional impact of their aggressive actions, making them more prone to engaging in cyberbullying. Conversely, high empathy serves as a protective factor against aggressive behavior in the online environment (Azizah et al., 2025).

Although the relationships among peer group relationships, empathy, and cyberbullying have been widely studied, research integrating these three variables into a single model remains limited, particularly in the context of Generation Z in Indonesia. Previous studies have largely focused on direct relationships between variables without examining the underlying psychological mechanisms. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the influence of peer group relationships on cyberbullying, with empathy as a mediating variable among Generation Z. This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to efforts in preventing cyberbullying.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying is abusive behavior carried out by an individual or a group using electronic devices, repeated continuously against a target who has difficulty defending themselves (Audrey Afralia et al., 2024). Another definition proposed by Syah (2018) states that cyberbullying refers to bullying that occurs through social media. Meanwhile, Marlef (2024) defines it as cruel behavior toward others by sending harmful content or engaging in other forms of aggression via the internet or digital technology.

Cyberbullying often occurs within peer group relationships, or among peers. A peer group relationship refers to a group of friends who share

similarities, such as age, and who can influence one another and shape individual behavior patterns and environments (Fauziyyah, 2018). Mappiare (1982) states that peer group relationships are groups of peers within the first social environment where adolescents learn to live with others who are not members of their family.

A healthy peer group that is free from cyberbullying should have a high level of empathy. Empathy itself is an attitude of valuing others' feelings as if experiencing them firsthand, and understanding what others express from their own perspective (Rogers, 1995). Empathy is also defined as the affective and cognitive ability of an individual to feel what others feel and to understand others' conditions based on their perspective (Lingga, 2022).

METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational design. The research subjects consist of 382 Generation Z respondents. The sampling technique was carried out using a quantitative sampling method in accordance with the research criteria.

The variables in this study include cyberbullying as the dependent variable, peer group relationship as the independent variable, and empathy as the mediating variable. Data collection was conducted using psychological scale instruments developed based on the theoretical aspects of each variable. The cyberbullying scale refers to the aspects proposed by Willard, the peer group relationship scale refers to aspects of openness and cooperation, and the empathy scale refers to affective and cognitive aspects of empathy. All instruments have undergone validity and reliability testing.

Data analysis was carried out through statistical assumption tests, followed by path analysis to examine both direct and indirect relationships among the research variables. The research problem in this study is whether peer group relationships can influence cyberbullying with empathy as a mediator among adolescents.

RESEARCH RESULT

The results of the study show that peer group relationships have a significant effect on cyberbullying behavior among Generation Z. These findings indicate that the quality of peer relationships plays an important role in shaping adolescents' behavior in digital spaces. Positive friendships, characterized by openness, support, and cooperation, tend to reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying. In contrast, unhealthy peer relationships can increase the risk of online aggressive behavior. These findings are consistent with social psychology perspectives that position peer groups as primary agents of socialization during adolescence (Abeele & Cock, 2023).

In addition, the results show that peer group relationships have a significant effect on empathy (Mayasari & Indrawati, 2023). Adolescents who are in supportive friendship environments tend to have higher levels of empathy compared to those in negative peer relationships (Yuastianingsih, 2024). Positive social interactions enable individuals to develop an understanding of others' perspectives and feelings, both cognitively and affectively (Isma et al., 2025).

Thus, empathy is not only understood as a personal characteristic but also as an outcome of social processes within peer groups.

Further analysis shows that empathy has a significant effect on cyberbullying (Angelita, 2023). Higher levels of empathy are associated with a lower tendency for adolescents to engage in cyberbullying behavior (I Made Sonny Gunawan, 2021). Adolescents who are able to understand the emotional impact of aggressive behavior are more capable of regulating themselves when interacting on social media (Dewi & Affifah, 2019). These findings reinforce the view that empathy functions as a protective factor against aggressive behavior, including in digital contexts. Empathy also serves as a foundation for healthy friendships; it needs to be continuously nurtured so that friendships remain strong and have positive impacts.

Other findings indicate that the higher the level of empathy within friendships, the lower the incidence of cyberbullying, and vice versa—lower empathy is associated with higher levels of cyberbullying (Audrey Afralia et al., 2024). This is supported by research showing that adolescents with less supportive friendships, minimal emotional attachment, and involvement in groups with aggressive norms tend to have higher levels of cyberbullying (Putri Danirmala Narpaduhita et al., 2014). These findings suggest that the quality of social relationships within peer groups plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' digital behavior.

Moreover, peer group relationships are positively associated with empathy. Adolescents who are in warm, supportive, and respectful friendship environments tend to have higher empathetic abilities (Cantekin & Examining, 2024). Healthy social interactions allow adolescents to learn to recognize others' emotions, understand different perspectives, and develop sensitivity toward others' feelings (Hafsawati et al., 2024). This reinforces the idea that empathy is not merely an individual trait but is also shaped through relational experiences in everyday social contexts.

The main finding of this study is that empathy is proven to act as a mediating variable in the relationship between peer group relationships and cyberbullying. This result shows that the influence of peer relationships on cyberbullying is not only direct but also indirect through empathy. Feelings that initially arise from empathy—among individuals who may not have previously known each other—can develop into comfort and lead to positive friendships. Positive peer group relationships contribute to increased empathy, which in turn reduces the tendency toward cyberbullying. Thus, empathy serves as a psychological mechanism that bridges the influence of the social environment on adolescents' online behavior.

Theoretically, these findings support interactional models that emphasize the interconnection between social and individual factors in explaining aggressive behavior. This study enriches the literature on cyberbullying by positioning empathy as a relevant mediating variable in the context of Generation Z. Practically, the results highlight the importance of strengthening positive peer relationships and fostering empathy in cyberbullying prevention programs, particularly within educational settings.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that peer group relationships have a significant effect on cyberbullying behavior among Generation Z. Positive peer relationships tend to reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying, while negative relationships increase the risk of such behavior. In addition, peer group relationships also have a significant effect on empathy, indicating that the quality of social relationships plays a role in shaping adolescents' empathetic abilities.

The results also show that empathy has a significant effect on cyberbullying, where higher levels of empathy are associated with a lower tendency for aggressive behavior in the online environment. The main finding of this study is that empathy is proven to act as a mediating variable in the relationship between peer group relationships and cyberbullying. This indicates that the influence of peer relationships on cyberbullying is not only direct but also occurs through a psychological mechanism in the form of empathy.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of an integrated approach between social and psychological factors in understanding and preventing cyberbullying among Generation Z. Strengthening the quality of peer relationships and fostering empathy should be key priorities in cyberbullying prevention programs, particularly within educational and adolescent social environments.

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